The Subjugation

Jefferson Rey S. Tayag

Chapter 1

"Leu, wake up. It's time to get ready for university. Your first day, remember? I cooked some noodles for you."

His mother Nur said.

Leu pulled the blanket over his head. The word university sat heavy in his stomach.

"Wait ten more minutes. I'll wait until the noodles cool down. I don't want to eat it hot," he mumbled into his pillow.

Nur stared at the lump under the blanket. She exhaled slowly and went downstairs.

Twenty minutes passed. Leu had not moved.

"Leu!" Nur's voice came from the stairs, sharper now. "Are you going to school or what? You are going to be late."

Leu groaned and swung his legs off the bed. The floor felt cold against his feet. Such a drag.

He walked downstairs and entered the bathroom. Cold water ran over his face. When he came out, his father Uld sat at the dining table, newspaper in hand.

"Your mother is tired, Leu. The pregnancy has been hard on her." Uld folded the paper and set it down. "Try not to add to it."

Leu sat beside his father. The clock on the wall ticked. Seven-thirty. Neither of them reached for the noodles.

"Aren't you going to eat?" Uld asked.

Leu looked into his father's eyes. They were kind eyes. Tired eyes.

"Pa, is this all there is to life?"

Uld's hand stopped mid-reach for his coffee. "What do you mean, Leu?"

"Did you choose this life? Or did you choose this life because something else recommended it for you?"

The words hung in the air. Uld looked past his son, toward the window. A neighbor was leaving for work, lunchbox in hand. Just like every morning.

"Life is more complicated than that, Leu," he said quietly.

"But you have not answered my question."

Uld picked up his coffee. He took a sip, then another. "You will grow out of this phase. Most people do. Now eat your breakfast before it gets cold."

Leu picked up his spoon. He swirled the noodles in the bowl. *You never grew out of it, Pa. You just buried it.* Leu thought.

Nur came down the stairs, one hand on the railing, the other on her lower back. "What are you guys talking about?"

Uld's face softened. "Leu is pondering deep stuff again. Our son must have been a philosopher in his past life." He chuckled, but it did not reach his eyes.

Nur laughed and touched her belly. "He is about to get a sibling to debate with soon. We just cannot keep up with this new generation."

Leu stared at his noodles.

Uld stood and kissed Nur on the forehead. "I am off to work, dear. Do not stress yourself too much. I love you." He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "You look beautiful as always."

"Tell me something I do not know," Nur said, leaning into him.

"You know everything, of course." He kissed her again, longer this time.

Leu watched them over his bowl. His father's hand resting on the small of her back. Her smile, genuine and easy. He looked away and ate his noodles.

Chapter 2.1

The street was already alive. Men in pressed suits walked with purpose, briefcases swinging. Teenagers in uniforms huddled near the corner store, laughing at something on a phone. A street sweeper leaned on his broom, watching them. Children chased a stray dog between parked cars.

Leu walked slowly, taking it in. What do they really want? he wondered. What is the thing they wake up for?

A tap on his shoulder.

He turned.

"Leu!" Rio grinned at him, slightly out of breath. "I have been calling you for the last minute. You just walked right past me."

Leu laughed, "I am surprised you were not late this time."

"Of course. Why would I be late? I have changed. You know." Rio flipped her hair dramatically.

Leu smirked. "You should. We are already in college."

"As if you do not get late too. You have been a heavy sleeper forever." She poked his arm.

"I wake up late, but I am never late. Do not get it mixed up."

"Maybe you just do not take baths. That is why you are never late. No shower, no delay."

Leu stopped walking. He turned to her and lifted his arm. "Oh really? Then smell it for yourself."

Rio's face went red. She stepped back, waving her hand in front of her face. "Ew! You are stinky! Get away from me!"

He stepped closer, arm still raised. She shrieked and ran a few steps ahead, laughing. He chased after her, and they reached the bus terminal breathless and grinning.

Chapter 2.2

Eight years ago

"Oink oink."

Rio sat on the bench, her cheeks warm. Three of her neighbors circled her, making pig snouts with their fingers.

"Oink oink, fatty."

She smiled. It was easier to smile. If she smiled, maybe they would get bored faster.

After a few minutes, they did. They walked away, still laughing, not looking back.

Rio sat alone. The playground was quiet now. She watched the swings sway in the wind. Empty. Like the seat next to her.

Footsteps on gravel.

A boy sat down. Not too close. Not too far. Just beside her.

"You saw all that, did you not?" she murmured, not looking at him.

"You are pretty observant," the boy said.

She turned. She did not recognize him. He had dark eyes that looked like they were always thinking about something.

"Yet I am a coward," she said, managing a small smile.

"Who is the coward? The pacifist, or those who believe in an eye for an eye?"

Rio blinked. "Why are you asking me this? I do not know."

"The coward is someone who refuses to choose between the two."

She looked down at her shoes. They were old. Scuffed. "I did not refuse. I just... do not know what to choose."

"What do you really feel?" He asked.

The question caught her off guard. No one had ever asked her that.

"I am used to it," she said. "I am fine."

"You are a coward and a liar." The boy said.

Her eyes stung. Heat rose in her chest. "You do not even know me, but you are harsh. You are just like the rest of them."

Her voice cracked.

"I am fat and nerdy. It is true. But why does it matter? Why do they have to bring it up?"

"So what if you are fat and nerdy?"

She looked up. Tears clung to her lashes. "What do you mean?"

"There is more to a human than that."

"Then... Do you think I am fat and nerdy?" She wiped her eyes with her sleeve.

"Yes. Based on what you said. But does it even matter?"

She had no answer. The wind blew. The swings creaked.

"It hurts," she finally whispered. "Being teased. It hurts."

"It hurts more when you cannot choose. Be a pacifist. Or fight back. The best choice is knowing when to fight." He said.

She stared at him. The tears had stopped. "So... should I have fought back earlier?"

"It is your choice. It will always be your choice." He replied.

The weight in her chest felt lighter. Not gone. But lighter.

"Thank you." She studied his face. "Who are you anyway?"

"My name is Leu Dominic. Just call me Leu."

"I am Rio Rose. Call me Rio." She sniffled. "You sound mature for your age."

Leu shrugged. "I do not know what to say, but thank you."

An ice cream vendor passed, his cart bells jingling.

"Do you want ice cream? I will get you some."

Rio's eyes widened. "Really? Thank you. Fifty scoops please!"

Leu sighed. He walked to the vendor and returned with one cup, two spoons.

Rio took a spoonful. It was cold and sweet. "Thank you, Leu." She ate another spoonful. "By the way, where are you from?"

"I live across the street. In this same village." He pointed. "I walk around here when I am bored."

Rio looked at the direction he pointed. Then back at him. "Join me for a walk every day?"

Leu considered this. Then he nodded. "Sure."

Rio smiled. It was the first real smile she had felt in a long time.

Chapter 3

Back to the present

The bus rumbled down the road. Leu sat by the window, watching buildings and people blur past. His reflection stared back at him against the glass.

What do all of these people truly want?

"Leu!"

Rio nudged him. Her phone was already up, the camera aimed at them.

"Look at the camera!"

He turned just as she snapped the photo. She grinned at the screen. Leu kept looking at her.

"Rio, what is it that you truly want?"

Her smile faded. She blinked. "W-who is it that I truly want?"

"No. What is it you truly want?"

"Oh." She looked down at her phone, then back at him. "I just want a comfortable job, start a loving family, and travel wherever I want."

"Why?" He asked.

She frowned. "What do you mean why?"

Leu shook his head. "I don't know. I just refuse to believe that's what you really want."

Rio sighed. "There you go again. That's life. We toil to survive. We reproduce to survive."

"I know." Leu looked back out the window. "It's just… I think it's not our whole life."

"Of course it isn't." Rio turned toward him. "I only mentioned surviving. Not **living**." She paused. "Let me ask you. What do you truly want?"

Leu met her eyes. "I want to be free."

"Free?" She smirked. "Are you oppressed or something?"

"You don't get it."

Her smirk faded. "Then explain."

Leu gestured at the window. "Look at them. Everyone's in chains. Chains they inherited. Chains they chose. Did they really want to study? Work? Or did they just want what comes after?"

Rio was quiet for a moment. "What do you think will happen if everyone just did whatever they wanted?"

Leu thought about it. "So you think freedom is chaos?"

"No. But freedom permits chaos." Rio replied.

He fell silent.

"What's your take?" he finally asked.

"I told you already." Her voice was softer now. "That's my choice. You told me that when we were kids. It was always my choice."

Leu looked away. "I want to affect other people's choices."

"You already do." She said it simply. "We all do."

He sighed. "I know. I just want everyone to realize there's something more."

"So what will you do?" Her tone wasn't harsh, just curious. "Force your worldview into their heads?"

His jaw tightened. "No… Never mind..."

The bus shook as it hit a bump. Rio glanced at him, then slowly placed her hand on his.

He looked at her.

"Leu." She held his gaze. "You already made me realize a lot. You're one of the reasons I am who I am today." Her voice was quiet. "I'll always be grateful."

Leu stared at her, unsure what to say.

Then Rio pulled her hand away quickly and looked away from him. Her cheeks were pink.

What was I thinking? She pressed her lips together.

"Rio." Leu's voice was gentle. "I'm still finding my own purpose. But… thank you."

She glanced at him. "Oh, okay. Good luck, Leu."

Leu cleared his throat. "So… why Psychology? I thought you liked Math."

Rio laughed, the tension breaking. "So I can measure how much antipsychotics I need. You know, so I don't go crazy listening to your philosophical yapping."

Leu pouted. "How is that Math?"

Rio poked his arm. "Grams. Milligrams. Duh."

But really, I just want to follow you wherever you go. She thought.

Leu shook his head, a small smile on his face. "Whatever."

He turned back to the window. But this time, he wasn't really watching the buildings pass by.

Chapter 4

The bus pulled away, leaving them at the university gate. Leu and Rio fell into step, crossing the wide courtyard toward the college buildings.

"So our department is the College of Science and Arts?" Leu asked, squinting up at the sign.

"Yeah, it says that in our portal." Rio pulled out her phone, scrolling through the website.

Leu unfolded a crumpled printout of his schedule from his pocket. "It says here our first subject is in Room 72."

He tucked the paper away. "We should go. We're going to be late."

They hurried through the corridors, following room numbers until they found it. Leu pushed the door open. The room was already full. Conversations paused. Heads turned. Eyes landed on them and stayed.

Leu leaned close to Rio's ear. "Let's sit at the back. Next to each other."

They slid into two empty chairs as the chatter slowly resumed.

A few minutes later, a man walked in carrying a leather bag. The room fell silent. He set the bag on the lectern, picked up a marker, and wrote on the whiteboard in clean, deliberate strokes.

Relius G. Hosana

He turned around. "When I call your name, stand up. Tell us who you are."

He went down the list. One by one, students rose, spoke, sat back down.

"Rio Rose P. Facundo." Relius said.

Rio stood. "Good morning everyone. My name is Rio Rose P. Facundo. You can call me Rio. I'm eighteen years old. I like reading books and studying philosophy. That's all, thank you."

Professor Relius nodded. "Thank you. Next."

"Leu Dominic T. Rabon." Relius said.

Leu got up. "I'm Leu Dominic T. Rabon. Leu for short. I'm nineteen. I like walking in the park, sleeping, and also studying philosophy like what my friend said. Thank you."

Professor Relius closed the attendance sheet and set it aside. "Alright. Now that we know each other, let's have a recitation. **What is sanity**? I'll call on you by your seating arrangement."

He started from the front row.

"Normal."
"Rational."
"Reasonable."
"Coherent."
"Conventional."

The answers came quick, one after another.

Professor Relius moved down the rows. "Rio."

Rio sat forward. "Sir, I think sanity is more about shaping yourself into an image that's acceptable to others. So you don't become an outcast."

"Thank you. Next."

Leu shifted in his seat. "Sanity depends on who's watching. In a social sense, anyway. But existentially, the word itself doesn't mean anything. Strip away everything that comforts a person. What happens?"

Professor Relius tilted his head slightly. "Tell me. What do you think happens?"

"They'll find something new to hold onto. Something to worship. And they'll call that sanity."

A pause. Professor Relius studied him for a moment. "Okay. Sit down."

He turned back to the class. "Good answers so far. You already know my name. This section is BSPsych-1A, and this subject is Introduction to Psychology."

The lecture began. Thirty minutes passed. Leu rested his chin on his hand, then let his head drop lower.

He whispered to Rio, "Hey. Let me copy your notes later? I'm going to sleep. This is dragging."

Rio exhaled quietly. "You never change."

Leu folded his arms on the desk and laid his head down, angled away from the front of the room.

Another hour crawled by.

"Alright," Professor Relius announced. "I need you to form groups of four. I'll assign each group a topic to present this semester."

Rio reached back and tapped Leu's shoulder. He stirred, lifting his head with bleary eyes.

"What?"

"Groups of four. We need two more people, dimwit." Rio whispered.

Leu rubbed his face and looked around. The room was rearranging itself into clusters. They didn't know anyone.

A boy and a girl walked over to their desk.

"Hi!" the boy said.

The girl smiled at both of them.

"Do you want to be a group?" she asked.

Rio smiled back. "Sure. Sit with us."

Leu looked at them. "Sorry, what were your names again?"

"I'm Roc." The boy pointed to the girl beside him. "This is Sona. We've been classmates since senior high."

"Nice to meet you both," Leu said.

They talked for a few minutes, comparing schedules, figuring out who lived where.

"Alright," Professor Relius called out. "Group leaders, come up and pick your topic."

Rio nudged Leu with her elbow. "You're the leader. For now."

Leu sighed heavily and stood. "Of course. It's always me."

He walked to the front and waited as other students took their turns.

Professor Relius looked at him. "Which topic does your group want?"

"The first one," Leu said.

Professor Relius raised an eyebrow. "You're interesting."

Leu nodded slightly, smiled, and walked back to his seat.

"What did you get?" Roc asked.

"The first topic."

Their eyes widened.

"WHAT?!"

Leu held up a hand. "Think about it. The first topic is usually the easiest."

Rio rolled her eyes. "Whatever you say, captain."

The four of them looked at each other and laughed.

Chapter 5.1

“Are you guys going to eat lunch? Wanna eat together at the cafeteria?” Sona said.

“Sure.” The group said.

The group then ordered some food and sat at a table inside the cafeteria.

Leu then looked at Roc and Sona.

“So what do you guys truly want in life?”

Rio's palm met her forehead. “Here he goes again…”

Roc and Sona exchanged a glance. “What do you mean, Leu?”

“He's always like this, so you guys need to get used to it.” Rio's laugh came out through her nose.

Leu's fork hovered above his tray. “Did you guys choose these lives you were living?”

Roc bit into his sandwich. Sona brought her cup to her lips.

She set it down. “No one gets to truly choose how someone gets to live their lives, Leu.”

Roc swallowed. “I agree.”

“Why?” Leu leaned forward.

Sona traced the rim of her cup. “No one, I repeat. No one would survive in this society if they get to choose with complete autonomy. There will always be moments where you need to compromise your own choice to get along with others.”

“Isn't compromise also a product of choice?” Rio rested her chin on her hand.

Sona's finger stopped tracing. “It depends on how a person views it, it's either compromise that deprives you of a choice you really want to make, or you choose to compromise.”

Roc wiped his mouth with a napkin. “I agree.”

Leu's jaw tightened. “I will step outside that framework, I will be free.”

“You're right, I agree.” Roc nodded.

The table went quiet. Sona's hand shot out and smacked the back of Roc's head.

“That's all you keep saying since earlier.” Sona's voice carried an edge.

“Ouch! What…? You know I'm not good at those kinds of conversations, so I just turn into a Yes Man.” Roc rubbed his head, his cheeks reddening.

Rio bit her lip, eyes crinkling.

Roc shrugged. “Jokes aside, I just go with the flow. I refuse to stress myself with those kinds of things.”

Sona turned back to Leu. Her eyes didn't blink. “It is impossible for anyone to step outside a framework, even animals and non-living things participate inside of it.”

Roc set his sandwich down. “I feel like you have the desire to be different from everyone, we all do. But don't get blinded by your ideals.” His voice came out lower than before.

Leu's fingers curled against the table. “Being different is not my sole goal.”

“I know, it is one of your goals.” Roc held Leu's gaze.

Leu exhaled. Long. Slow. The air between them sat heavy.

Rio lifted her phone. “Hey, guys! Look at the camera!”

Sona's face softened. Roc straightened in his seat. Rio's arm stretched out, phone angled toward them.

click

In the frame, Sona's smile pulled to one side. Roc's eyes squinted mid-blink. Rio's free hand waved.

Leu stared at something beyond the lens. His mouth is flat. His eyes were distant.

Chapter 5.2

The remaining classes ended. The sun set. The group bid farewell and scattered into the evening.

Rio walked beside Leu. She glanced at him, his jaw tight, his eyes fixed on nothing ahead.

“You okay?” she asked.

Leu didn't answer. He kept walking.

Rio touched his shoulder. He blinked.

“Oh?”

“I'm asking if you're okay.” Rio repeated.

“I'm just tired.” He rubbed his neck. “First day of classes.”

Rio searched his face. “Aren't you happy we made new friends?”

Leu looked at her then. His gaze was heavy like someone carrying something she couldn't see.

“Did our new friends understand each other?” His voice was calm, empty. “Did they understand me?”

Rio's brow furrowed. “Leu, it's only the first day.”

“Did you ever understand me?”

The question hung between them.

“Yes.” She said it quickly, wanting to bridge whatever gap had opened. “You're a man that sees more than what others can. You notice more. That's admirable.”

“Then tell me.” His eyes held hers. “What is it I see?”

Something in Rio's chest tightened. Frustration rose before she could stop it.

“Can you please just stop being an edgy teenager for once?” she murmured.

“I heard that.”

Rio's eyes widened. Her lips trembled. “I—I'm sorry. I didn't mean to.”

“Are you still a liar since our childhood?” Leu replied.

The words hit her like a slap. Tears pricked her eyes. Her chest felt heavy, crushed.

“No…” Her voice came out muffled, small.

Leu's face changed, something like regret flickering through. “I'm sorry… I didn't mean to…” He reached for her.

Rio stepped back. She walked past him, hiding her face, her heart raw and aching.

Leu stood there. He cursed himself silently. *I'm so fucking stupid*.

Rio walked fast. She didn't stop until she reached an empty bench, the streetlights humming above her, the night dark and quiet around. She sat. Snot ran down her nose. She wiped at it with her sleeve.

Me, a liar? Am I still a liar? I was just trying to cheer him up.

Minutes passed. Then footsteps.

She stood quickly, fear flashing through her until she saw him.

Leu.

She looked away and sat back down. Bowed her head.

He stepped in front of her. Held out his hand.

A handkerchief. And a cup of strawberry ice cream with a wooden spoon.

“Can I sit next to you?” His voice was soft.

She nodded.

He sat. Silence stretched between them.

Leu took a deep breath. “I'm sorry.”

A pause. Then he laughed at himself, quiet, tired.

“Funny, isn't it? Now I'm the liar. Me being an edgy teenager is the truth. But I didn't mean it when I said you remained a liar.”

Rio's hand shot out. She smacked the back of his head.

“Ouch!” He groaned.

“Idiot.” Her voice cracked, but her eyes were lighter now. Sniffling, she said, “I was just annoyed that time. Sure, you were edgy. But it had a purpose. It was never empty.”

She paused. “I'm sorry too.”

Their eyes met, then they laughed. Quiet at first, then together, the sound breaking through the heaviness.

“Wipe that snot off your face,” he said. “You look like the Rio I knew when we were kids.”

She punched his arm.

“Ow!”

“You even bought me my favorite flavor.” She looked at the cup. Strawberry. She looked at him and smiled. “Brings back memories...”

“Of course. Why would I forget?” He glanced around at the dark. “But we should probably get going. It doesn't feel safe here. You should eat that ice cream while we're on the road.”

“Sure.” She stood with him. “Thank you, Leu.”

“No.” His voice was quiet. “I should be the one to thank you. You're always the one keeping me grounded.”

She looked at him. “And you're the one who inspires me.”

They stood there, eyes locked, something unspoken passing between them.

Leu smiled warmly. “Let's get going.”

They walked side by side into the dark. Rio ate her ice cream. The streetlights faded behind them.

And somewhere along the way, their hands brushed.

Neither pulled away.

Chapter 6

"So, how was your first day at school?" Nur set down her glass.

Leu chewed his rice. "As usual, Ma. Tiring. Met some people."

"And Rio?" Uld looked up from his plate. "How's your childhood friend?"

"Our friendship is doing well, Pa."

Uld nodded. "That girl's always been by your side. Look out for her."

Leu scooped another spoonful. "I will."

A pause. The clink of utensils.

"By the way, how are you, Ma?" Leu looked at his mother. "How's the pregnancy?"

Nur waved a hand. "It's going fine. Don't worry about me. Focus on yourself and your studies."

Leu watched her. The way her shoulders sagged. The way her eyes blinked slower, heavier.

"You should rest after this, Ma." He stood, gathering plates. "I'll wash the dishes."

Uld reached across and took the plates from him. "I'll handle it, son. You go rest. Early class tomorrow."

Leu hesitated. Then nodded.

He changed into pajamas. Brushed his teeth. Lay down on his bed and groaned.

The ceiling stared back.

The scene with Rio played again. Her face. Her tears. The smack on his head. The laugh after.

Then he remembered what Roc said.

Don't get blinded by your ideals.

He breathed deep. Reached for his phone. Scrolled. Then he saw a quote from a known philosopher.

From the outside, you seem mature with a philosopher's mind. But inside, you're just a child lost in a sweet delusion.

He stared at the words.

His thumb stopped moving.

Am I deluded? Just a teenager trying to be edgy? A teenager going through a phase?

Now he remembered what Sona said.

You will never be free from the concept of frameworks. No one will.

He threw his arm over his eyes. Breathed deep again.

Now he remembered his own words, from the class earlier.

Strip off everything that comforts them. What would happen?

Then he thought

I will carve my own path.

His eyes burned. He didn't wipe them.

A notification buzzed.

It was a group chat named **Da Squad**

Rio added you, Sona, and Roc

Rio: Hey peeps! Are you guys still awake?

Sona: Yeah… I was looking for documents related to what we're going to present next time.

Roc: What a hardworking lady, salute!

Sona: Shut up, you have barely contributed to group work ever since.

Roc: We're going to ace this presentation, trust me.

Leu: I'll go to sleep now, guys. I'm feeling tired lately. Goodnight.

Rio: Goodnight, Leu.

~

Rio set her phone down. A moment later, it buzzed again.

Sona: You have a big fat crush on him. *smirk emoji*

Rio blinked at the screen.

Rio: Huh?! I don't have a crush on Leu!

Sona: But I haven't mentioned any name yet… *another smirk emoji*

Rio stared. Her face warmed.

Rio: But…

Rio: How did you know?

Sona: It's obvious, sweetie. The way you looked at him when we were at the cafeteria. The way you laugh at his jokes. And I saw you guys sitting on a bench together late at night!

Rio's eyes widened.

Rio: What?! How did you see us?

Sona: I am currently living in a dorm. And as I looked through the window, I saw you guys. Oh how sweet you two are!

Rio pressed her phone to her chest. Then typed.

Rio: Can we please keep this as a secret?

Sona: A secret?! You mean he still doesn't know? That guy is more oblivious than a rock! I thought he's way more intelligent than that.

Rio: I don't know too. I don't know if he knows or not. I think he's too focused on his ideals to even care about it.

Sona: You better make your move now before it's too late, girl.

Rio stared at the words. Her thumb hovered.

Rio: I don't know what to do. I'll observe first. By the way, it's getting late now. I'm getting tired. Goodnight, Sona. *heart emoji*

Sona: Goodnight, Rio.

Rio set her phone on the nightstand. She lay back and stared at the ceiling.

In another room, Leu still had his arm over his eyes. His phone glowed faintly beside him.

Neither slept.

Chapter 7.1

Leu opened his eyes.
I will carve my own path.
The first thought that came into his mind.

The ceiling stared back. His face was empty. His eyes carried something too heavy for someone his age.

Downstairs, a note waited on the table.

Good morning son, me and your mother will go to the clinic today for her check-up. We prepared your food on the table, good luck on your studies. We love you.

Leu read it. Set it down. His footsteps to the bathroom were quiet. The shower ran. Water hit the tile. He stood under it, eyes on the drain.

Later, he dressed, ate, then left.

At the corner, a figure waved. Leu squinted his eyes. It was Rio.

She jogged over. Her smile faded when she got close.

"Leu?" She studied his face. "Are you okay?"

"I am fine." His voice came out flat. "You?"

She crossed her arms and pouted. "What did we talk about lying?"

He paused. "I didn't sleep well. I was thinking about stuff."

"Me too," she said. "What were you thinking about?"

His hand found the top of her head. "I will carve my own path." The corners of his mouth lifted barely.

Rio blinked and held still for a second. "Oh," she said. "I'll always support you, Leu."

They walked toward the bus stop.

Rio talked about last night's TV show. Her hands moved as she spoke. Leu walked beside her, listening, the faint smile still there.

Then—

SPLAT.

The sound was wet and the thump was loud.

Screams cut through the morning. A woman shrieked. Someone yelled into their phone. Rio gasped, stumbled back.

Leu stopped breathing.

His eyes locked onto the shape on the pavement. The angle of the limbs was wrong. Blood spreads slowly.

A ringing started in his ears. High and thin.

"LEU!" Rio grabbed his arm. Pulled. "LEU, OH MY GOD, WE NEED TO—" Her voice cracked. She tugged harder. "COME ON."

He didn't move.

People crowded around. Someone was crying. Sirens were heard in the distance.

Rio wrapped both arms around Leu's bicep and yanked. Hard. He stumbled, let himself be pulled away. But his head stayed turned. Eyes still on the bloody corpse.

They walked fast. Rio's breath came in short bursts. Her grip didn't loosen.

Finally, blocks away, Leu spoke.

"They chose it."

Rio looked at him, confused.

"That's the path they chose."

His home appeared ahead. The door is already open. His parents stood on the porch.

Leu's parents looked confused then Rio told them everything.

Nur rushed forward. "Are you okay? Are you hurt?" Her hands checked his face, his shoulders.

Uld stood behind her, jaw tight.

Leu walked past them. Up the stairs. Rio followed.

He sat on the edge of his bed. Didn't look at her.

"That was their choice."

"We don't know the full story, Leu." She sat beside him. "No one ever willfully chooses to die."

"Then what influenced the choice?"

Her mouth opened. Closed. She shifted closer. Wrapped her arms around him.

"Don't worry. I know it's hard right now. I'll always be here."

His body stayed still against hers. His eyes stared at the wall. Heavy. Empty.

After a moment, she pulled back. "I should go. My parents will worry." She stood. Paused at the door. "I'll check on you later, okay?"

The door clicked shut.

Leu sat alone.

Didn't move.

Didn't blink.

The ringing in his head hadn't stopped**.**

Chapter 7.2

Leu lay on his bed, eyes fixed on the ceiling. He kept playing what happened earlier in his head. The body on the pavement. The crowd. The police tape flapping in the wind.

Then a knock on his door.

Three soft knocks. The door creaked open slowly. It was Nur. She walked toward his bed, carrying a bowl of food. Steam rose from it.

"Son, you should eat. It's getting late." She placed it on the table beside his bed.

"Are you still thinking about what happened earlier?" She sat on the edge of his bed. The mattress dipped.

A few seconds of silence. The clock ticked.

"Did the victim choose it?" Leu asked.

Nur let out a deep breath. "You shouldn't think that way, son..."

Leu turned his head to look at her.

"Everything's not always a choice." She looked down at her hands. "What happened earlier was not a choice, it was a tragedy. We may not know the full story, but no one would willingly choose to die."

Leu thought about something he said to Rio when they were kids. *Those who refuse to choose are a coward.*

"What is with you and your obsession with choice?" Nur asked.

"Would you understand and listen if I said so?" Leu replied.

Nur looked him straight in the eye and nodded.

"I always keep repeating this that it makes even Rio frustrated." Leu picked at a thread on his blanket. "I want to be free."

"Aren't you already free?" She gestured at the room. "You have a roof under your head, you eat three meals a day, you go to university. Most young people don't have that."

"That is not what I truly want..." Leu said.

"Then what is it that you truly want?" Her voice was soft.

Leu looked past her, toward the window. The curtains were drawn but streetlight came through the edges. "A world where I can do anything I want." He looked back at her. "Do you think it is possible, Ma?"

Nur was quiet for a moment. The clock ticked. "Are you willing to do anything for it?"

Silence. Leu looked into his mother's eyes. He nodded.

More silence. The clock kept ticking.

Tears formed in Nur's eyes. They caught the light from the window.

"Me and your father will always support you and the path you take, son." Her voice was muffled. "From now on, you are free."

Leu frowned. "Why are you crying, ma?"

She wiped her eyes. "You are making a very heavy decision, son. That's all."

Then Nur hugged him tightly. Her arms wrapped around him and held on. "Goodnight, son." She pulled away slowly, stood up, and left the room. The door clicked shut.

Leu sat there. *That was... weird?*

He picked up his phone from the nightstand. He scrolled while taking spoonfuls of the dinner his mother brought. Rice and fish. It was cold now.

He scrolled past memes. Past videos. Past photos.

Then he stopped.

40 year old widowed man committed suicide by jumping off a building because of losing his only child to cancer due to not being able to pay medical bills because he was fired from his job.

Leu froze. The spoon hovered near his mouth. The ringing in his head started again.

He was a coward.
No he's not, it was a tragedy.
Why didn't he keep moving forward?
Why didn't he push back against the world?
Don't think like that, anyone would break down.
Maybe if he chose a different path, it wouldn't have happened.

Leu dropped his phone. It landed on the blanket. He dropped the spoon too. It clattered against the bowl. He rubbed his face with both hands.

He lay down on his bed, eyes fixed on the ceiling without blinking. The cracks in the plaster looked like roads.

The clock ticked. The house got quiet. Footsteps upstairs. Doors closing. Then nothing.

Midnight came. Everyone was asleep. Except Leu.

He got up and walked to his wardrobe. He took out a black hoodie and put it on. He found a facemask in his desk drawer and put it on.

He opened his bedroom door. The hallway was dark. He knew which floorboards creaked. He stepped over them. He went down the stairs quietly.

His father's toolbox was in the kitchen corner. He opened it carefully. He moved tools aside until he found a spray paint can. He took it.

He went out the back door. The lock clicked behind him.

Outside was dark and empty. Streetlights hummed. No cars. No people. Just the wind.

Leu walked. The can felt good in his hand.

He found a building with a blank wall. He looked around. No one. He shook the can. It rattled and he sprayed. The paint hissed, he wrote "***You are subjugated***." The letters dripped.

His heart pounded. He stepped back and looked at it. He smiled behind his mask.

He walked to more buildings. More walls. More words. "***You are subjugated***." Each one felt good.

Then he reached the building where the man jumped. He recognized it from the news. It was five stories and had dark windows.

This must be the company he worked at.

No security guard. A light was on inside but no one moved.

He crossed the street. He sprayed on the wall: ***Think, or you're next. You are subjugated.***

He stepped back and looked at it. It wasn't enough.

He saw a large rock in the parking lot. He picked it up. It was heavy but it fit in one hand. He went in front of the building and threw it at the glass window.

Glass exploded. It crashed onto the floor inside. No alarm. Just broken glass.

Leu ran.

He sprinted as fast as he could. His lungs burned. His legs were pumped. He didn't look back. He smiled under his mask. The first time he felt alive in years.

He reached his front door. Bent over. Hands on his knees. Breathing hard. Still smiling.

He went inside. Dark and quiet. He put the spray can back in the toolbox exactly where he found it. He closed the latch.

He went upstairs. Past the quiet boards. Into his room. He took off the hoodie and mask and pushed them to the back of his closet. He put his pajamas on.

He lay on his bed. Eyes on the ceiling.

The cracks still looked like roads. Like paths. Like choices.

He played what happened over and over in his head. The glass breaking. The words on the wall. The running.

The clock ticked.

Leu was still smiling.

Chapter 8

Leu woke up with a smile on his face, fixed his bed, and went downstairs to greet his mother and father.

“Look who woke up early today.” Nur said with a smile.

“Our son might have solved the universe with his philosophical brain.” Uld said teasingly.

Leu clicked his tongue, “Stop it, that’s cringe.” He slid into his seat at the dining table.

“So, what happened? Yesterday you were silent as a rock.” Uld added.

Leu looked at the bowl of cereal in front of him, stirred it slowly. The colors swirled in the milk.

“My dream is more colorful than this bowl of fruit loops.” He said.

Nur and Uld looked at each other then burst out laughing.

“That’s also cringe!” Uld replied, shaking his head.

“Whatever…” Leu rolled his eyes, and took a bite.

After an hour, Leu bid goodbye to his parents.

“You're leaving this early?” Nur said.

“Yes, Ma.” Leu replied, already at the door.

After Leu left his house, he saw Rio waiting on the corner of the street.

Rio jogged towards Leu with a cheerful smile as always.

“You look bright today, Leu!” Rio said.

“Why not?” Leu bantered.

“I mean, you were so gloomy yesterday… nevermind…” Rio replied, her smile fading for a moment.

Leu then flicked Rio’s forehead, “Don't think too much, I'm fine.”

The two then started heading towards the bus terminal.

As they passed by the building where the man jumped off, there were authorities in uniform patrolling the vicinity. One of them was talking to the security guard.

Rio looked at the wall where something was written ***Think, or you're next. You are subjugated***. She also saw broken glass scattered on the ground below it.

What just happened? Rio thought, then she glanced at Leu.

Her eyes widened. Leu was staring at the wall, a small smile playing at the corner of his mouth.

“Leu?” She nudged his arm.

“What's with that smirk?” She added.

“I'm just glad that someone dares to challenge the system.” Leu replied, still looking at the words.

Rio frowned. “System? What are you talking about?”

Leu finally turned to her. “Haven't you heard the news? About the man who jumped off this building?”

“I'm caught up with the news, but what is smirk-worthy about this?” Rio's voice tightened. “A man ended his life because it became unbearable. But here you are, smirking about some random esoteric ramblings painted on a wall.”

“So, what are we supposed to do? Mourn like cattle and take it like good little kids?” Leu replied.

“This is just… not the way, Leu…” Rio said quietly.

“What happened next was a message targeted to the right audience. Seems you weren't one of them.” Leu replied.

“Why do you support this?” Rio replied.

“Because I get where he is coming from.” He paused. “You know what? Nevermind. Let's hurry up or we're going to be late.”

Leu then gently took Rio's arm and guided her toward the terminal. They boarded the bus and sat next to each other.

The bus rumbled to life. For a while, neither spoke.

“So… did you sleep well last night?” Leu asked, glancing at her.

“Not really. I was worried about you.” Rio looked down at her hands. “How about you?”

“You don't need to worry about me. I'm doing fine.” Leu paused. “I had a talk with my mother last night.”

Liar.

The word surfaced in his mind, unbidden. He ignored it.

Then he reached over and held Rio's right hand in both of his. “Thank you, Rio. Thank you for always being there for me.”

Rio's face warmed. She pulled away quickly, tucking her hand into her lap. “Y-you're welcome! As long as it's you, Leu!”

Silence for a few seconds.

Rio stared out the window, her reflection staring back. Her thoughts swirled like the cereal in Leu's bowl earlier.

“So, ummm… do you have a crush on any of our classmates?” She kept her eyes on the window. “Like, do you even find any of them pretty?”

“No. I have no time for that yet. I'm focused on my dream.” Leu replied.

Liar.

The word came again. Louder this time.

Rio became quiet, her reflection in the glass frowning before she turned further away.

“What about you?” Leu asked. “Do you have a crush on any of our classmates?”

“No.” She paused. “But I will devote myself to everyone who is dear to me. And you're included.”

The lie settled between them like a comfortable blanket. They both knew it was there. Neither pulled it away.

“I'll always support you too, Rio.” Leu replied. He cleared his throat. “By the way, what is our first subject this morning again?”

Rio let out a slow breath. “**Ethics.**”

Leu nodded and turned to the window. Outside, the city blurred past. The red words from the wall still burned in his mind.

Chapter 9.1

As they got off the bus, both saw a homeless person wandering the street in front of them.

Leu looked at the man. His hair was messy and long. His clothes were saggy with patches. His skin was dirty. He looked thin.

Many people walked past him, not even glancing his way.

“Rio, wait for me here.” Leu said.

“Where are you going?” Rio asked.

“Just wait for me here.” Leu said.

He crossed the street to where a vendor was selling fishballs and squidballs. Students crowded around the stall.

Leu grabbed a plastic cup and filled it with food from the frying pan. He slipped away without paying. The vendor didn't notice because of the crowd. Rio didn't see either.

Leu crossed back and gave the food to the homeless man.

The man looked at Leu's face. He took the food and started eating fast. He didn't say anything.

Rio watched what Leu did. Her chest felt warm.

Then she looked at Leu's face. She saw that odd smirk again.

Her smile slowly faded.

Leu walked back to her. “Let's go?”

“Sure…” she said.

They went inside the lecture room. Roc and Sona waved at them to sit together.

The four sat next to each other.

“I heard about yesterday,” Sona said. “Me and Roc talked to the professors. We told them what happened. You guys are excused.”

“Really? Thank you.” Leu said.

Minutes later, the professor walked in.

Heads turned. The room went quiet.

“Sir. Relius, again?” Roc whispered.

“I assume you all know me by now,” Relius said. “I'm also your professor for **Ethics**.”

He wrote on the whiteboard: ***What is Ethics?***

“Anyone want to answer?” Relius asked.

Sona raised her hand.

“The most basic answer is that it's the study of right and wrong, sir.” she said.

“What is right and wrong for you?” Relius asked.

“When something helps people and its process minimize suffering as much as possible, that's right. Otherwise, it's wrong.”

“Is suffering wrong?” Relius asked.

“Only if it's unnecessary, sir.” Sona said.

“Anyone want to add?” Relius said.

Rio raised her hand. “Is there such a thing as unnecessary suffering?”

“Yes. Like people who hurt themselves for no reason. Masochists.” Sona said.

“There's always a reason. What if suffering makes them happy?” Rio said.

“What about murderers? Thieves? People who like hurting others for no reason?” Sona replied.

Leu raised his hand. “There's always a benefit. Maybe not for the person hurt or the one doing it. But for the people who see it. For the people who know. Growth and change is contagious.”

The class got quiet.

“You're insane.” someone whispered.

“Thanks for your answers,” Relius said. “Let's move on.”

An hour passed. Leu slept. Rio sighed. Sona and Roc took notes.

“Class dismissed.” Relius said.

Rio tapped Leu's back. He woke up slowly.

“You slept the whole time?!” Roc said.

“Shh!” Rio said.

They said goodbye to the professor and left.

Walking down the hall, Sona spoke. “I appreciate what you said earlier, Leu. But the ends will never justify the means.”

“You are entitled to your opinion,” Leu said.

Rio and Roc felt the tension.

“Hey,” Roc said. “Want to go to an internet café before we go home? Someone said the next professor isn't coming.”

“I'm in!” Rio said.

“Fine. But the maximum is three hours. I have things to do.” Sona said.

“Leu, you coming?” Roc asked.

“You guys go. I have things to do.” Leu said.

“I think I’ll pass on too, guys.” Rio said.

“Don't worry, I don’t want to be a buzz kill. I just have something important. I'll make it up to you next time.” Leu said.

Sona rolled her eyes.

Leu said goodbye and walked away.

“Take care, Leu. Okay?” Rio said.

Chapter 9.2

Leu stepped into the alley, it was dark and empty. He slipped off his backpack, unzipped it. He put on a red hoodie and a mask. From the bag, he pulled a spray paint can, it’s his father's, from the toolbox.

His heart beat faster, that feeling again. The adrenaline.

He faced the wall. Sprayed.

You are subjugated.

The red letters dripped down the bricks. Beneath the mask, his mouth curved.

Alley to alley. Same words. Same smile.

In the next alley, after he painted, feet pounded the pavement. A middle-aged man burst in, wild-eyed, gasping. Another man tackled him from behind. They hit the ground hard, rolling, grunting, fists and elbows.

The second man's hand went to his pocket. Came out with a gun. Before he could aim, the first man lunged. The gun spun across the ground. Stopped at Leu's feet.

Leu stared at it. The men kept fighting. A blade appeared. Clattered against a pipe. Then one man had it, was on top, pressing it down. The blade tip against the other man's neck. The man underneath straining, hands pushing back.

"HELP!" His voice tore through the alley. "HELP ME!"

Leu didn't move, his heart was pounding. The gun lay at his feet.

The man's eyes found him, wide and begging.

The blade lowered, closer.

"SHOOT!" the man screamed. "SHOOT!"

Leu's hand closed around the gun, cold and heavy. He raised it, both hands trembling and pointed at the man with the blade.

bang

The man fell sideways. Blood spread beneath him, dark and quick. Then it was silent.

Leu's head rang, this time it was louder than before. His breath came in bursts. His hands shook. The spray can fall from his fingers. The gun followed. He turned and ran, he ran with all his might.

"HEY KID!" Someone shouted behind him. He didn't look back.

He ran until his lungs burned. Until he couldn't run anymore. He stopped, bent over, gasping. When he looked up, he was at the playground. The one from before. Where Rio had been. Now empty. Swings still.

His head rang louder.

It's your choice. It was always your choice.

Chapter 10.1

After the trio finished playing in the internet café, Roc suggested for the three of them to go buy some boba tea, then they sat on a bench.

“So, when did you meet Leu?” Sona asked.

It was silent for a few seconds.

“We have been friends since we were kids, he’s the reason who I am today.” Rio replied.

“What did he do?” Roc asked.

Rio took a deep breath and smiled.

“He gave me the freedom to choose for myself, that’s all.” Rio replied.

Then Rio told the two what happened to the playground when they were kids.

Sona looked into Rio’s eyes

“Did he give you your own freedom, or you just saw your own freedom in him?” Sona replied.

The group fell silent.

“What do you mean?” Rio said to Sona.

“I’ll leave it for you to think about.” Sona replied.

Rio looked at the ground, repeating what Sona said earlier in her head.

“Why don’t you guys just enjoy life? Don’t overthink everything too much.” Roc added.

Roc let out a sigh.

“I used to be like you guys too… but it didn’t go well.” He said. “But I just ended up pushing away people that were dear to me.” He added.

“What do you mean?” Rio asked.

“I can see my past self in Leu, I was always questioning everything relentlessly to the point I stopped taking care of myself and the people around me.” Roc replied.

“He even got trolled and doxxed multiple times in social media just because he was fighting for his beliefs.” Sona added.

“What were you fighting for, anyways?” Rio replied.

“Eh… it was mostly political, I lean more towards communism. It’s a long story, but no matter what happens in this economy, suffering will still persist. So I just chose to go with the flow and focus on those that are dear to me.” Roc replied.

“You were not as I thought you were.” Rio replied.

Roc let out a chuckle. “I just **chose** to protect what is dear to me, but if anyone gets in my way, there will be war.” He added.

Rio lets out a smile, “If only Leu thinks that way, then maybe… me and him would…" Then she realized what she said and quickly covered her mouth.

“You don’t need to act surprised, it’s pretty obvious.” Roc said while laughing.

Rio then gazed at Sona with sharp eyes, “Did you tell him?!” She pouted.

“Why would I?” Sona bursts out laughing.

“Oh… so you told Sona about it. But don’t worry, it’s just so obvious. I mean, very very obvious.” Roc said while still smiling.

“Is it really that obvious?” Rio asked as her face grew pink.

“Yes.” Roc and Sona said in unison.

“If it is that obvious, then why doesn’t he notice it?” Rio asked.

“I doubt he doesn’t.” Roc replied. “I just think he’s too lost in his mind.”

“I don’t know, I’ve sensed something off about him lately. His eyes, the way he smirks. Regarding the man who committed suicide by jumping off a building last time, someone wrote on the wall of it something like ***Think, or you’re next. You are subjugated.*** Then I looked at him, he was smirking. He said he was glad that someone dared to challenge the system. But earlier, he gave food to a homeless man who was wandering in front of our university. Then I saw it again, the same smirk.” Rio said.

Silence came as the wind blew and the three looked at each other.

“That is indeed concerning.” Sona replied.

Roc nodded.

“I think we should get going, the sun is about to set soon.” Sona said.

The three then bid farewell to each other, but as Rio turned around, Sona grabbed her by the arm and whispered in her ear.

You should keep your eye on Leu.

Chapter 10.2

The key scratched against the lock twice before it slid in. Leu's hands were shaking. He pushed the door open, stepped inside, and leaned against it until it clicked shut.

Stop it. Just stop.

His heart was still pounding. He wiped his hands on his pants.

The house was dark. No lights on, no sound from the kitchen. His father's chair by the TV was empty.

Leu stood still for a moment, confused. Then he reached for his pocket.

Nothing.

He patted the other one.

Nothing.

Shit! My phone!

A knock came from the front door.

Leu froze. His breath was heavy.

Another knock. Three of them, it was quick.

Leu opened it.

A man stood there. Thin face. He wore jeans and a dark hoodie. Leu had seen him before but couldn't remember where.

The man walked past him into the house like he owned it. He looked around the dark living room, then turned to Leu.

"You got good aim," he said. "It would be a waste not to use it."

Leu's throat tightened. "Who are you?"

The man watched him for a second. "The one you saved tonight." He paused. "You know who the other was?"

Leu didn't answer.

"Cop. Off-duty. No uniform." The man added.

The words sat in the air. Leu felt something drop inside him. It was heavy and cold.

The man walked to the small table by the stairs. He set things down one by one. Leu's phone. The gun. The spray can.

Leu stared at them. He didn't remember dropping them. He didn't remember anything after the alley.

The man reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded paper. He placed it next to the gun.

"No funny business, we know where you live," the man said. Cold but not mean. "I should go." He added.

He moved toward the door.

"Who are you?" Leu said again.

The man stopped at the threshold, looked back, but he didn't answer. Then he was gone, the door clicking shut behind him.

Leu stood there. Then he sat at the dining table. He rubbed his face with both hands. His skin felt cold and damp.

Get it together.

He picked up the phone, the gun, the piece of paper, and the can. He put the can back in his father's toolbox. He went upstairs and pushed the gun behind loose boards in his closet.

Then he went downstairs and entered the bathroom. He turned on the faucet, and he scrubbed his hands. Hard, then harder. The water ran pink. He kept scrubbing until his skin burned.

He looked up.

The mirror showed him a face he knew. Pale, wet hair, red hands.

A word circled in his head.
Free. Free. Free.

He kept looking.

The reflection smiled.

Chapter 11

Leu got out of the shower, his face flat, eyes empty. Water dripped from his hair onto his shoulders. He wiped his hand across the fogged mirror and stared at himself for a moment, then turned away.

He went to check his phone. A message waited.

Son, me and your mother went out to buy groceries. Will be there soon.

He put the phone down. On the table, a single piece of paper, its edges slightly crumpled, waited for him. He picked it up and unfolded it.

You are subjugated.

He read the words. Once, twice. A small, breathy sound escaped him, something between a wheeze and a stifled cough. Then a chuckle, low and rough, until it erupted into a full, tearing laugh that filled the empty rooms. He laughed until his ribs ached, until his eyes stung. When it finally subsided, he just stood there, the sound echoing into silence.

He moved to his wardrobe and dressed with a strange, quiet care. A thick, worn hoodie. A familiar scarf, a gift from Rio years ago, wrapped loosely around his neck. From the back of a loose drawer, he retrieved the gun, its weight cold and heavy in his hand. He placed it in an empty backpack, added a few essentials, and finally, the phone. He zipped it shut.

He paused in the living room, his eyes tracing the surroundings, the clock on the wall. His own voice echoed in his mind,

It's your choice. It was always your choice.
It's your choice. It was always your choice.
It's your choice. It was always your choice.

He found himself in front of the hallway mirror.

The reflection was still smiling

It was a wide, unfamiliar grin. He watched it for a long moment.

Then he was out the door, the latch clicking shut behind him with a soft, final sound. He didn't look back at the very foundation he was raised on.

The slam of the front door was what finally broke the silence of the empty house an hour later.

“Leu? We’re back.” Uld called out, struggling with two heavy grocery bags. Nur followed, wiping her brow.

“Leu?” she called towards the hallway. Nothing.

Uld checked the bedroom. The bed was neatly made. The wardrobe door hung slightly ajar. He came back to the living room. “His room’s empty. His bag’s gone.”

Nur’s smile faded. “Gone? Gone where?”

They checked the backyard. The street. By the time the sun began to set, they began to panic. Uld was on the phone.

“Rio? It’s Uncle Uld. Is Leu with you?” He listened, his face paling. “Okay. Okay, thank you.”

He hung up. “She thought he was here.”

Nur’s hand flew to her mouth. “Uld…”

The next hour was a call at the police station. The officer on the phone was sympathetic but efficient. “A missing person report. How long has he been gone?” The questions felt like cold water. “Any recent arguments? Any signs of distress?” They had none to give. Just confusion. Just fear.

Rio arrived at the house just as they were leaving for the station. She burst through the door, her face flushed from running. “Aunt Nur! Uncle Uld! What happened?!”

Nur just shook her head, tears spilling over. “He’s gone, Rio. Leu is gone.”

Days passed by, time felt empty. The dining table, once a place of shared meals, was now just a surface where cups of untouched coffee grew cold. Uld would stare at the walls. Nur barely left the bedroom, her phone clutched in her hand, willing it to ring.

The first week passed in fragments. Uld printed missing posters and taped them to lamp posts along the streets Leu used to walk. Rio went with him, holding the tape while he pressed the paper flat against concrete. Each time a car slowed down near them, both of them would look up too quickly, hope flaring and dying in the same second.

At night, Nur sat by the phone. She stared at old pictures Leu had months ago, sleep became shallow and rare. The house grew quieter each evening. Police officers came twice more to ask routine questions. Had he mentioned new friends? Any strange behavior? Uld answered steadily, but after they left, he stood in Leu’s doorway for a long time, staring at the bed as if expecting it to move.

Rumors began circulating online about a masked youth behind the graffiti appearing across the city. Rio

saw the posts before Uld did. She stared at the red letters on her screen and felt her stomach drop. She did not show Nur.

Rio visited every day after school. She'd find Nur sitting in the dark, the curtains drawn. "Any news?" she'd ask, her voice small. Nur would just shake her head.

One evening, she found Uld in the kitchen, staring at a cold frying pan. "Uncle Uld? Have you eaten?"

He blinked, as if waking from a dream. "Eaten? Oh. Not yet. Your aunt… she's not hungry."

He looked at Rio, his eyes empty. "I keep thinking… Did I miss something? A sign? Did I say something?" He wasn't asking her, he was asking the empty air. Rio had no answer. She just put her hand on his arm.

Then Nur grew sick. The doctor said it was the stress, she was not eating, not sleeping. She was hospitalized, Uld stayed by her side every day, holding her hand, telling her Leu would come back. Nur would just close her eyes and nod weakly.

The doctors advised rest, but rest did not come. Nur's body carried both the child and the weight of uncertainty. Each morning she would ask if there had been any calls. Each evening she would whisper Leu's name before closing her eyes.

Rio visited with fruit and small updates about school, pretending normalcy still existed somewhere. But every visit ended the same way with silence stretching between them, and the unspoken question of where he was.

Weeks folded into each other. The protests grew larger. The phrase **YOU ARE SUBJUGATED** appeared on banners, on digital posts, on city walls. Uld began turning off the television when the news mentioned it. He never said why.

Then, Uld sent a text message. Leu's phone buzzed. He picked it up. It was a message from Uld's number, he read the words in his mind. "Your mother passed away."

Nur was gone. The baby had come early, and she was gone.

Uld looked up at Rio, who had just arrived. His face was a mask of utter devastation.

"This morning. The baby… he's here, but she… she's gone." He pointed towards the nursery where a newborn lay sleeping, unaware. "And my son… my first son… he's gone too."

Rio sat beside him and took his hand. They didn't speak. There was nothing left to say.

Few weeks later

The cemetery was quiet, the only sound was the rustle of wind through dry leaves. Leu stood before the headstone, reading the name carved into the cold granite. NUR RABON. He didn't kneel, didn't place a flower. He just stood, his hands in the pockets of his hoodie.

Footsteps on the gravel path. He didn't turn.

"It must be nice," a voice said from behind him, with exhaustion and grief, "for a stranger to visit my wife's tomb."

Uld stopped a few feet away, an infant wrapped in a blanket held carefully in his arms. He looked at the back of his son's head, at the familiar slope of his shoulders. He knew it was Leu.

Leu turned slowly. His face was calm. He looked at his father, then at the sleeping infant in his arms. "What are you still holding on to?" he asked, his voice quiet, devoid of any accusation.

Uld's jaw tightened. He looked down at the baby, then back at the man who was his son. "I still have someone," he said, his voice breaking on the last word. "My wife and I's only child."

Leu's gaze didn't waver, he simply nodded. He turned back to the tombstone one last time, his eyes tracing the letters of her name.

Then he turned and walked away, his footsteps silent on the gravel path, leaving his father and brother standing before the grave.

Chapter 12

Across town, the muffled sounds of the protest were a distant, rhythmic heartbeat against the walls of her. Sona sat at her desk, the light from her laptop illuminating her tired face. On the screen was the same news feed that had been playing for hours: the growing movement, the graffiti, the figure of a young man who was becoming its reluctant, anonymous symbol.

A soft buzz from her phone broke the silence. It was a message from Roc.

Roc: You seeing this on the news?

Sona typed back, her fingers feeling heavy.

Sona: I see it.

Roc: That's him, isn't it?

Sona: I don't know what to think anymore. He would be willing to risk anything.

A long pause. Then:

Roc: Maybe the cost is the point. For him, anyway. I just… I hope Rio's okay.

Sona's gaze drifted from her phone to a textbook on her desk, She remembered Leu's answer in class about suffering being contagious for the sake of growth. His ideas were no longer just ideas, his ideas became alive.

~

Professor Relius stood at the window of his study, a cup of coffee growing cold in his hand. He watched the last stragglers of the protest march disappear around a corner, their chants now just an echo. The name on the news had been kept anonymous, a "youth leader" they called him, but Relius knew. He remembered the boy who had slept in his class, the one who had given that strange, piercing answer on the first day.

Strip away everything that comforts a person. What happens?

Relius took a slow sip of his cold coffee. He had asked the question, and now, it seemed, one of his students had lived the answer. He had taught the theories, the frameworks of thought. But Leu had taken the framework and, quite literally, tried to burn it down.

Relius set the cup down and turned away from the window. He had a lecture to prepare for tomorrow, that is if the government can contain what is happening. But for the first time in his long career, he wasn't sure what he would say. How could he stand in front of his students and speak of theoretical choices, when one of his students was out there, living the consequences of a very real one?

On the other side of the city

The playground was empty, the swings hung motionless. On one, Rio sat, her feet dragging the ground, her eyes fixed on nothing. The swing beside her was empty.

Leu sat down on it. The chains creaked softly.

"I loved Leu," Rio said, not looking at him, her voice soft and distant as a memory. "But I can't seem to find him anywhere now."

Leu watched the gentle sway of her swing.

"He became a stranger," she continued, her gaze finally drifting to his face, searching the familiar features for the boy she knew. "A free man. A few months ago."

In the distance, a chorus of voices rose and fell, a rhythmic chanting growing closer. The wail of sirens can be heard. A crowd was approaching, a river of people carrying signs that bobbed above their heads. The words were clear: **YOU ARE SUBJUGATED.**

Leu said nothing. He didn't look at the marchers, didn't acknowledge the sirens. He just reached into his backpack and pulled out a single item. He leaned over and placed it gently on the ground beside Rio's swing, next to her foot. A small cup of strawberry ice cream, a wooden spoon sticking out of it, is already beginning to melt in the warm evening air.

Then he stood up without saying a word.

He walked towards the crowd, his figure merging with the people, swallowed by the masses of signs and chants. The sound faded, replaced by the creak of Rio's empty swing.

She looked down at the ice cream. She didn't pick it up. She just watched it slowly turn to liquid, then the moon finally rises.

Then, slowly, she reached down. She picked up the small cup. The ice cream was mostly liquid now, she took the wooden spoon, dipped it in, and brought it to her lips.

It was cold, sweet, and familiar.

She looked up at the empty swing beside her.

"Thank you." She whispered.

The sirens grew distant. The chanting slowly faded. The playground was silent again.

Rio took another spoonful of the melting ice cream and watched the stars begin to emerge in the darkening sky.

END